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C O N F I D E N T I A L SKOPJE 000457

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EUCOM PLEASE PASS SHAPE FOR SACEUR STAFF

E.O. 12958: DECL: WHEN MACEDONIA JOINS NATO
TAGS: MOPS NATO PREL KFOR KV MK
SUBJECT: POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF CLOSING AIRSCAN IN
SKOPJE

Classified By: DCM Tom Navratil for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) We have learned that a decision memo has been forwarded to SACEUR recommending, among other options, that the Airscan operation based at the Skopje airport cease entirely. NATO has used Airscan since 2003 to provide aerial surveillance for KFOR. (For operational reasons, Airscan was based in Macedonia as opposed to Kosovo.) In 2008, the GoM notified NATO that Airscan would have to move -- essentially at its own expense -- to a new facility at the airport. After extensive negotiations between the GoM and NATO (with active U.S. Embassy engagement with the Macedonian leadership), the GoM finally offered to pay all costs (U.S.\$ 500,000) associated with the move.

¶2. (C) We are not in a position to judge the military necessity of this asset. However, closing Airscan would have certain political-military ramifications here. NATO's decision at the 2008 Bucharest summit not to offer membership to Macedonia until the "name issue" with Greece is solved dealt a serious blow to the population and the government and undermined the Alliance's credibility, though without diminishing the consistent 90% public support for joining. While professing that Euro-Atlantic integration remained its top goal, the psychological impact -- for both the government and the public -- of Bucharest should not be underestimated. This in turn may have contributed to the leadership's initial disinterest in ensuring Airscan stay in Macedonia, but the government's eventual positive decision demonstrated its understanding that engagement and commitment are a two-way street.

¶3. (C) Therefore a decision to close Airscan could send a message to Macedonia that NATO in general (and the U.S. in particular, as Airscan is an American company and given the outsized role of the U.S. as a champion of Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration) is reneging on its engagement with Skopje. In addition, senior leaders such as CHOD LTG Stojanovski and MoD Konjanovski did expend political capital to ensure that the GoM did the right thing and work to keep Airscan in Macedonia. They -- and Prime Minister Gruevski as well -- could well feel burned if they felt they spent this capital for nothing.

¶4. (C) Finally, should indeed SACEUR determine that Airscan will close, we would recommend that NATO engage at the most senior level to send a clear message to the Macedonian leadership that this was purely an operational call. At the same time, part of the message should also be that this is a final decision and not a hint that the Alliance wants to re-negotiate the move of the facility. We strongly recommend telling the Macedonian government that NATO is ceasing Airscan operations only when this is a final decision with no foreseeable need to reconsider. If NATO were to change

direction again it would exacerbate the aforementioned problems, and it may be problematic to re-start Airscan here once the operation has been pulled out.

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